

MAYOR'S BUDGET SPEECH

I would like to start by again thanking you Mrs Killeen and your team of course, for the work you have all completed on what has again been an extremely difficult budget for our shire.

No one would have predicted COVID-19 and no one certainly would have ever predicted the ongoing effects this virus has had on all economies around the world. Unfortunately, Douglas is certainly not immune to these ongoing economic circumstances and an incredible amount of time and effort has gone into these budget reports to ensure we can get the best outcome for our rate payers. The acknowledgement of that work to your whole team is paramount.

I will start by saying that this is a budget of reality. Whilst I would have absolutely preferred to see more of the things I know residents and ratepayers are asking for, the simple fact is that this financial year, we as a council also need to recover. We need to recover from the short fall in revenue that occurred whilst helping businesses and residents in the various forms that we did during the heightened COVID-19 period. Upon reflection, I certainly have no regrets in doing so and I am proud that this council was able to assist where we could.

Now though, is the time to bring the direction back to making this Council and the region sustainable for the long-term future.

I believe this is a responsible budget that continues to deliver transparency, sensible investment and renewals, as well as strengthen the shire's economy for its future. Last year, COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions depleted our local economy - we must learn from this. If we don't, it was a wasted experience that could well occur again.

Where we will be at the end of this period, will be determined by the tough decisions this Council makes now to set ourselves up for the future.

In the 20/21 financial year, this council budgeted to deliver its biggest capital works program, bringing over \$33 million dollars' worth of projects. For a small council, this is an achievement well worth mentioning.

This budget currently has a further \$16 million dollars going to capital works, with items such as a million-dollar investment in trunk infrastructure to bring the new Craiglie estate on line so we can increase our housing availability, \$8 million dollars in civil works including a cycle way from Cooya to Mossman, replacement of Anichs Bridge, replacement of Warner Bridge and roads, footpaths and kerbside renewals.

We will commence works on the Mossman Port Douglas Sports Master plan, further the indigenous signage program, put \$450,000 into parks and gardens, and most importantly, over \$4 million into further future proofing our water and wastewater with renewals, upgrades and improvements. As further grant funding becomes available, more projects can be added to this list.

We will continue with sensible policy and investment to build our resistance to outside influences by continuing to grow our rate base, diversifying our industries and exploring revenue-raising opportunities.

This Council continues to have an important role to play in keeping our local economy moving. Whilst we are gaining on the elusive surplus goal, we can't lose sight of ensuring that our communities are sustainable as well.

Council's financial position is now expected to be pushed back to a \$2.35 million operating deficit and we have been able to maintain the minimum general rate increase to 2.8% across the board, better than the 3.3% increase originally forecasted.

Meanwhile, about 36% of people living in units, known as Residential Building Units, will see a reduction in their rates bill. You will also see through our new categories, that if you live in your house or unit, your rates will now be lower than those with holiday homes or rental properties.

The new categories achieve a more equitable distribution of rates closer inline with community expectations. Under our new categories, people who live locally in their house or unit have a fairer assessment of their bills than ever before. There will be winners and losers in these new categories, but the playing field is certainly becoming more even and further rate assessments will be made this financial year to further improve the fairness and balance of rateable properties.

I appreciate that some may be critical of this minimum increase of 2.8% being more than CPI, which was the goal, and I will be the first to apologise, but no one foresaw the effects of COVID-19 and we must ensure that we continue to have enough revenue to be able to offer the current service levels plus more in this shire.

We are persisting at looking for ways to create jobs, alleviate housing shortages, repair infrastructure and ensure our economy becomes stronger.

Unfortunately, we are still facing uncharted territory, but we continue our commitment to getting the Shire back on track through growth and diversity, rather than cutbacks and reductions.